Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

They Broke Bread with Sincere Hearts: Imagining New Gymnastics Cultures

by B.L. Jefferson | Feeding the Civic Imagination, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT This article discusses everyday acts of resistance through two stories of bread in competitive gymnastics through the lens of infrapolitics and hidden transcripts. The author discusses how the culture of elite competitive gymnastics sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate methods of coaching and care—often giving rise to infrapolitical acts. Furthermore, the article centers Larry Nassar's cooptation of gymnasts' hidden transcripts—particularly around food—as a strategy to further his abuse of hundreds of athletes. Finally, through the concept of the civic imagination, the author encourages the gymnastics community to begin to engage in open discussions over meals toward change in gymnastics cultures.

KEYWORDS bread, civic imagination, gymnastics, infrapolitics

After performing for hours in a gymnastics competition to showcase our abilities to college recruiters, our team sat down to eat dinner and our stomachs growled in anticipation. I scanned the menu and decided on a cheeseburger and fries. Our waitress walked up to our table with a basket loaded with freshly baked bread covered with a crisp white towel. Just as we were about to eat, our coach yelled, "Put that bread down!" Bread fell to the table and onto the floor. Our coach went on to explain that white bread was poisonous and detrimental to our health. She kindly asked the waitress to take the bread back. Shocked onlookers pretended they weren't watching and listening intently. The waitress complied and sarcastically added, "I guess this table won't be having dessert."

Shortly after, I felt my teammate tap the side of my thigh under the table. I looked down to see a piece of bread in her hand. Unbeknownst to me, my teammates had been passing a piece of bread beneath the table as our coach told us about its evils. I broke a piece off and held it nervously. When my coach turned away from me, I threw it into my mouth. As the bread morsels melted there, I thought, "You can't tell me what to do"—a thought that I felt was laughably untrue outside of the privacy of my own mind. I looked around at my smirking teammates who had already participated in the same act. Through this action, we communicated a sense of solidarity, rebellion, and empowerment. Though our coach had good intentions in directing us to refrain from a food she believed had little nutritional value, I personally pushed back against what felt like constant pressure. Specifically, the sport often made me feel that not much was in my control—from bodily injury to hyper-management of my time and the evaluation (i.e., out of a "perfect 10.0") of my athletic performances. While I loved the sport, I battled a fear of judgment based on my life performances and equated my self-worth to others' evaluations. These feelings often tempted me not to try at all, rather than to try and fall short of others' expectations. Thankfully, now through my personal faith, I am reminded that I am loved—beyond and despite my own works—by a higher power. However, at the time, this tiny win felt momentous. Alas, when the time finally came to order dinner, I asked for a grilled chicken salad and my stomach grumbled in protest.

Bread has attached to it much symbolic significance. Biblically, for example, bread signifies physical and spiritual sustenance: "Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will not go hungry."[1] It also signifies shared community ("They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts").[2] Another example is the popular line regarding peasants in the French Revolution often attributed to Marie Antoinette: "If the people have no bread, then let them eat cake."[3] Furthermore, one trend in the popular imagination regarding health and nutrition associates bread with excessive carbohydrates, spiked blood sugar, and weight gain.[4] This would explain our coach's disdain for

white bread. A simple mixture of flour, yeast, and water can point to dynamics of power, politics, and the human condition.

My story about bread reigns in my memory as one of *infrapolitics*. James C. Scott utilizes this term to describe a political struggle that does not operate through open, public defiance.[5] Rather, this form of resistance often occurs unbeknownst to those in power, or in ways that are seemingly, for the most part, in compliance with expectations or norms. In an attempt to understand class and power relations in a Malay village, Scott observed the ways in which communicative interactions took place, and especially how interactions between those in power and those in subordinate positions transpired differently in public versus in private. Scott calls these interactions *transcripts*, with *public transcripts* "describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate."[6] He describes *hidden transcripts* as those that occur "'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders."[7] Within the otherwise seemingly fixed structure of power, hidden transcripts can contradict the deference and obedience present in public transcripts, suggesting a struggle over power both in and out of plain sight. While some consider gymnastics to be a mere after-school activity, it lends itself to clearly demarcated power structures. For a large part of their waking hours, competitive gymnasts follow the instructions of the adults in the gym. Gymnasts entrust their futures (e.g., hopes for elite and Olympic competition or for college scholarships) to the hands of the adults who sometimes have more time with and influence over gymnasts than their parents do. While mine is a lighthearted bread story in a low-stakes environment, I have pondered the severity of other, more serious, circumstances in which gymnasts participate in infrapolitics.

In 2016, the *Indianapolis Star* published an article on allegations of sexual misconduct by athletic trainer Larry Nassar: a trusted team doctor for USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University.[8] According to an editor's note, after the release of that article, over 150 more people came forward with allegations against him. Some of these athletes were featured in the 2020 Netflix

documentary *Athlete A*. A haunting takeaway of the documentary was that Nassar, in a clearly abusive culture, was viewed as one of the nicest and most trustworthy adults. In the midst of the frenzy of media stories exposing Nassar's abuse, *Athlete A* demonstrates the harrowing fact that Nassar gained athletes' trust through the cooptation of their hidden transcripts.

Scott posits that "the relationship between dominant elites and subordinates is . . . very much of a material struggle in which both sides are continually probing for weaknesses and exploiting small advantages."[9] Much of Nassar's advantage was the culture of the sport itself and the behavior of the coaches, especially for the elite-level gymnasts. In *Athlete A*, Jennifer Sey, the 1986 USA Gymnastics national champion, explained that "emotional and physical abuse was actually the norm" in her training.[10] Gymnasts in *Athlete A*, and also in their victim impact statements, made it clear that Nassar was well aware of this abuse from the coaches, and positioned himself as a friend. Jamie Dantcher, a former Olympian in the 2000 games, stated in her impact statement, "Larry, you saw all the physical, mental and emotional abuse from our coaches and USAG national staff. You pretended to be on my side, calling all of them the monsters. But instead of protecting children and reporting the abuse you saw, you used your position of power to manipulate and abuse as well. You knew I was powerless."[11] Another survivor, Kaylee McDowell, stated: "You always had my side when [my coach] John Geddert did not . . . which was always . . .You had a close bond with John as well. You were dearest friends, but would talk about him like he was the devil himself behind his back."[12] This is echoed by Mattie Larson in her impact statement: "We would joke around, and you would even listen when I tell you how mean my coaches and Martha [Karolyi] was. I truly thought you understood. You took complete advantage of my innocence."[13] Jordyn Wieber, a former Olympian and survivor of Nassar's abuse, stated that "He figured out his victims' vulnerabilities and exploited them, casting himself as the nice guy in a demanding, high-stress atmosphere."[14] Former Olympian McKayla Maroney stated: "He always had a sympathetic ear for complaints about our coaches.[15] The fact that

Nassar was not a coach, but a doctor entrusted with the gymnasts' health, placed him in a position in which he appeared to be authority-adjacent, and a listening ear for their complaints. In such a restrictive environment, these complaints were one of the only ways the gymnasts felt they could push back on their coaches' overbearing and abusive authority.

Furthermore, Nassar was aware of the restrictive culture around food and the high pressure these elite gymnasts felt to be skinny. For example, Jamie Dantzcher recalled an incident in which she lost six pounds from having the flu, and her coach told her to figure out how to keep it off.[16] Mattie Larson, in describing her experience at the Karolyi ranch—the famous training facility in a remote area of Texas, at which athletes were subjected monthly to Nassar's abuse—stated that they "lived off of the snacks that [they] had to sneak in their luggage."[17] Aware of this restrictive culture around eating, Nassar again positioned himself as a friend by taking part in the covert provision of food and snacks. Mattie Larson went on to say about the training camp, "He would even give us candy or junk food which was completely forbidden."[18] McKayla Maroney stated, "He would bring us food and coffee at the Olympics when we were hungry. I didn't know that these were all grooming techniques that he used to manipulate and brainwash me into trusting him."[19] Maroney specifically said that he would purchase caramel macchiatos and loaves of bread for her. Jamie Dantzcher echoes these accounts: "He would sneak us food and candy, and leave stuff under our pillows."[20]

Nassar had access to the gymnasts' hidden transcripts–namely, knowledge through both conversation and observation that they were unhappy with their coaches and hungry—and lent an ear to their offstage complaints. He provided material solutions to their hunger, posing as an ally while building his own abusive structure of power. Several other gymnasts in *Athlete A* recall the ways in which Nassar positioned himself as a friend, often through secretly satisfying a basic need.[21] In this case, "love and concern" were guises for abuse. Former champion Jennifer Sey states in the film, "You know, these kids go to these national training

centers when they're ten years old. They are abused and mistreated for years. So even by the time they're of age, the line between tough coaching and child abuse gets blurred. So then when real, like obvious abuse—sexual abuse—happens, you already don't believe your own take on things."[22] These gymnasts had to discern a "fine line" between the genuine concern of adults on one end of the spectrum and abuse on the other. The classic line, "I'm hard on you because I love you," is difficult for young gymnasts to navigate—especially when those tough methods can result in measurable and significant success. Nassar clearly crossed boundaries and harmed gymnasts; the murky waters of elite competitive gymnastics culture, alongside the negligence of the adults in power, allowed his abuse to continue for decades.

In this article, I have discussed two very different stories in which bread—or food more broadly—featured in gymnasts' quotidian acts of resistance. In my personal story, we engaged in infrapolitics that resulted in a sense of peer bonding and empowerment. In the second story, a resistance strategy (e.g., sneaking food into suitcases or complaining about coaches) was observed, manipulated, and coopted by someone with existing power. As concealed "bread," or food more broadly, was central to both of these stories, I would like to imagine how food can instead be used openly in the imagination of new gymnastics cultures.

Henry Jenkins, Gabriel Peters-Lazaro, and Sangita Shresthova define the civic imagination as "the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions."[23] They highlight the importance of being able to imagine a different world in making change, and seeing oneself as a "capable" "civic agent" in bringing that change to pass in solidarity with others.[24] Each member of the gymnastics community, including gymnasts, coaches, parents, and medical professionals, has a role in shaping its culture along with the wellbeing, safety, and success of the gymnasts. Furthermore, the amount of time and dedication that gymnasts allot to the sport means that the sport, in turn, often shapes them as people and as civic agents in the broader world outside of

gymnastics. After the Nassar event, US gymnastics culture is under a microscope, with strong pleas to reimagine its norms and structures.

Scholars have pointed to food as a potential form of intercultural communication and community building.[25] Given the significance of food in the stories of some Nassar survivors, the US gymnastics community could begin to imagine new gymnastics structures over food; they could regularly "break bread with sincere hearts," with a vulnerable openness to feedback and change. These events could be local (i.e., with participants from one gymnastics training center), regional (i.e., a collection of gyms within the same region), or national. They could involve gymnasts, their families, coaches, nutritionists, sports psychologists, therapists, and others like team doctors who regularly provide care to the gymnasts. Events could take place outside of the usual practice gyms so as to remove participants from the normal structures of power. Participants at these events could eat delectable, hearty meals (free of judgment) and engage in various activities such as conversations, reflections, conflict-resolution, letter-writing, art, poetry, role-play, and panels. Furthermore, there would need to be an assurance that any heart-to-heart conversations or conflict would not be met with retaliation in the gym personally or politically. The goal of breaking bread together is to imagine alternatives to existing gymnastics cultures that center on building community, accountability, and removing any fear from addressing serious concerns long before meetings like the Larry Nassar hearings are necessary.

These events would also have the potential to strengthen many of the wonderful things about existing gymnastics culture, such as healthy intergenerational communication and mentorship, team building, character formation, and friendship. In an era in which a call for change within gymnastics is thrust to the spotlight, these would be opportunities to collectively participate in the formation of healthy everyday gymnastics practices. We must recognize gymnastics as a highly political sphere worthy of civic imagination efforts. Breaking bread can be viewed as an act of solidarity and a breaking down of existing power structures

within the sport in an effort to imagine more loving and safer gymnastics cultures. Other communities—especially those that serve minors or other vulnerable groups—should view Nassar's actions as an example of how liberatory strategies have the potential to be used against those who participate in them; with this in mind, it is important to *quickly*, safely, and openly discuss gymnasts' concerns at the root. Ultimately, we can imagine a gymnastics culture rooted in the love of the sport, and one that is free even from the need for infrapolitics—especially around a basic need like food. Centering those imaginative practices in intentional, caring ways around food—a symbol that is both used as a tool for resistance and as a tool for manipulation—could be a good start.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Petal Samuel and the Civic Paths and *Lateral* editorial team for their thoughtful and generous feedback and conversation, which aided tremendously in the writing of this article.

Notes

1. John 6:35 (New International Version, Zondervan Publishing House, 1984). ↩
2. Acts 2:46 (New International Version, Zondervan Publishing House, 1984). ↩
3. Nancy N. Barker, "'Let them eat cake': the Mythical Marie Antoinette and the French Revolution." *The Historian* 55, no. 4 (1993): 709–24, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6563.1993.tb00920.x < https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6563.1993.tb00920.x> . ↩
4. For example, see Brianna Steinhilber, "5 Reasons to skip white bread for good," *Everyday Health*. August 13, 2015. https://www.everydayhealth.com/news/reasons-skip-white-bread-good < https://www.everydayhealth.com/news/reasons-skip-white-bread-good> . ↩
5. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990). ↩
6. Scott, *Domination*, 2. ↩

7. Scott, *Domination*, 4.

8. Tim Evans, Mark Alesia, and Marisa Kwiatkowski, "Former USA Gymnastics Doctor Accused of Abuse," *Indianapolis Star*, September 12, 2016, https://www.indystar.com/story/news/2016/09/12/former-usa-gymnastics-doctor-accused-abuse/89995734 < https://www.indystar.com/story/news/2016/09/12/former-usa-gymnastics-doctor-accused-abuse/89995734> .

9. Scott, *Domination*, 184.

10. Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk, dirs., *Athlete A* (Actual Films/Netflix, 2020), 104 min., https://www.netflix.com/title/81034185 < https://www.netflix.com/title/81034185> .

11. Click on Detroit – Local 4 – WDIV, "Nassar Victim: Jamie Dantzcher Statement," YouTube, April 6, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUWuN371hio < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUWuN371hio> .

12. "Kaylee McDowell vs Larry Nassar: Victim Impact Statement." YouTube, uploaded by Susan Bahns, November 25, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3zQBVN_BPc < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3zQBVN_BPc> .

13. "Nassar victim: Mattie Larson Statement." YouTube, uploaded by Click on Detroit - Local 4-WDIV, April 6, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsEVmL02AZg < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsEVmL02AZg> .

14. Tracy Connor and Sarah Fitzpatrick, "McKayla Maroney Says Larry Nassar Earned her Trust with Food," *NBC News*, April 19, 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/mckayla-maroney-says-larry-nassar-earned-trust-loaf-bread-n867301 < https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/mckayla-maroney-says-larry-nassar-earned-trust-loaf-bread-n867301> .

15. Connor and Sarah Fitzpatrick, "McKayla Maroney Says."

16. Cohen and Shenk, *Athlete A*.

17. Click on Detroit – Local 4 – WDIV, "Nassar Victim, Mattie Larson Statement," YouTube, April 6, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsEVmL02AZg

18. Click on Detroit – Local 4 – WDIV, "Nassar Victim, Mattie Larson Statement."

19. Connor and Fitzpatrick, "McKayla Maroney."

20. Cohen and Shenk, *Athlete A*.

21. Cohen and Shenk, *Athlete A*.

22. Cohen and Shenk, *Athlete A*.

23. Henry Jenkins, Gabriel Peters-Lazaro, and Sangita Shresthova, *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change* (New York: NYU Press,

2020), 5, https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2021.2183 < https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2021.2183> .

24. Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro, and Shresthova, *Popular Culture*, 5.

25. Andrea Wenzel, "Eating Together, Separately: Intergroup Communication and Food in a Multiethnic Community," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 620–641; David F. Purnell, *Building Communities through Food : Strengthening Communication, Families, and Social Capital* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019).

Author Information

B.L. Jefferson

B.L. Jefferson is an interdisciplinary scholar and media consultant whose work focuses on the ways in which groups navigate structures of power in media, education, and sports. She is especially interested in the ways in which children and families incorporate media content into their everyday lives, and is curious about whether and how media impact children's worldviews, relationships, and learning. With this in mind, she is passionate about the thoughtful creation of content for children and their families. After completing her PhD in Communication at USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, she worked as a researcher and consultant on projects for Google and Toca Boca, and as a Production Assistant at Tinkercast. Previously, she worked as a Research Manager at the Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop and as a Research Assistant for 9 Story USA. B.L. received her master's from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in the Technology, Innovation, and Education program and her BA at the University of Pennsylvania.

View all of B.L. Jefferson's articles.

Article details

B.L. Jefferson, "They Broke Bread with Sincere Hearts: Imagining New Gymnastics Cultures," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.13

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053